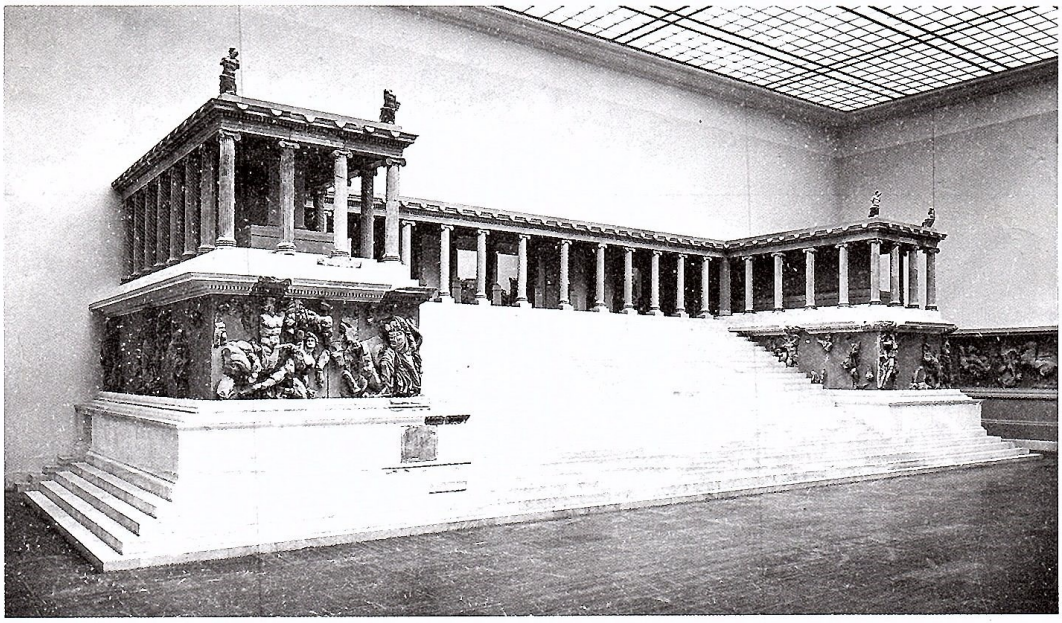
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz

Antikensammlung Pergamonmuseum

THE PERGAMON ALTAR

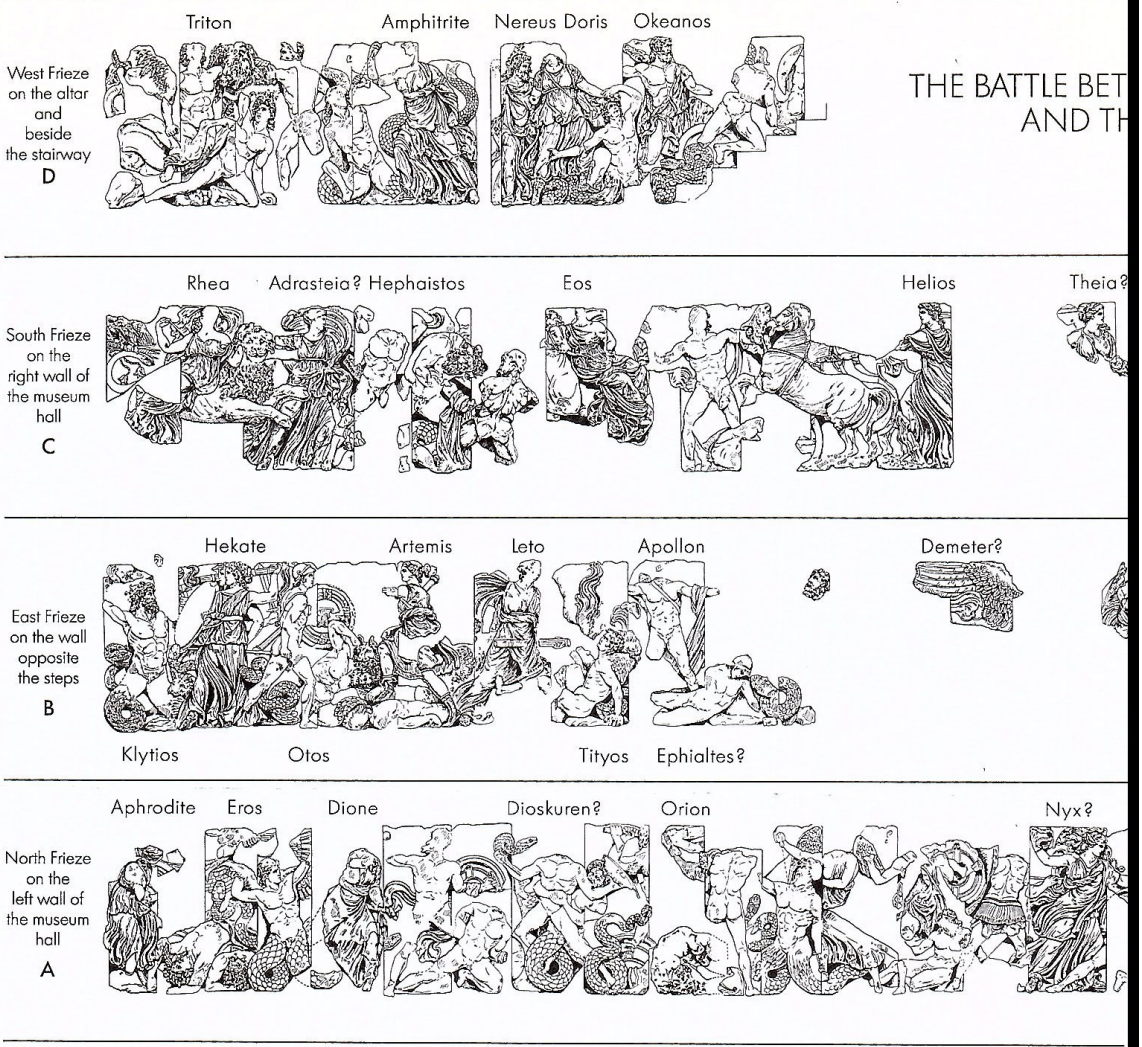


Pergamon Altar

Rediscovery and Excavation

"In Pergamon there is a great marble altar, 40 feet high, with remarkable statues – the entirety is surrounded by a Battle of the Giants."

With these words the Roman Lucius Ampelius described the Great Altar of Pergamon in his "Book of Memorable Facts" (8,44). Several centuries later, however, nothing remained of this extraordinary building: subsequent visitors were only impressed with the citadel's ruins. Were it not for the excavations undertaken in the last quarter of the 19th century, Pergamon would have remained in a ruinous condition, and a clear picture of this late Greek metropolis would never have emerged.
Credit for excavating Pergamon uncontestably belongs to the German road construction engineer, Carl Humann. After discovering the ancient city in the winter of 1864–65, Humann clung tenaciously to the idea of excavating it. His hopes were realized in 1878, when permission was granted and excavations began. Due to Prussia's military successes several years earlier, the German Empire had been proclaimed in 1871 and the new capital, Berlin, had begun to play a dominant role in the cultural life of Europe. These political developments led to the commencement of large excavation campaigns in different cities from Egypt to the Near East in order to acquire objects from the antique world that would enhance Berlin's cultural legitimacy. When Carl Humann approached the Berlin Museums with an excavation proposal for the Pergamon citadel, his detailed knowledge of the area impressed Alexander Conze, the director of the Berlin Museums. Thanks to his support, Humann was able to begin systematic excavations eight years later.
As early as the first excavation campaign, Humann made several important discoveries: in the Byzantine wall built around the citadel in later years, he found a well preserved slab from the large Pergamon altar frieze; on the altar terrace, he came across pieces of the foundation and other slabs which had decorated this once celebrated building. In the course of three excavation campaigns, these original pieces were sent from Pergamon to Berlin in accordance with the contracts made between the Berlin Museums and the Turk-



THE BATTLE BET
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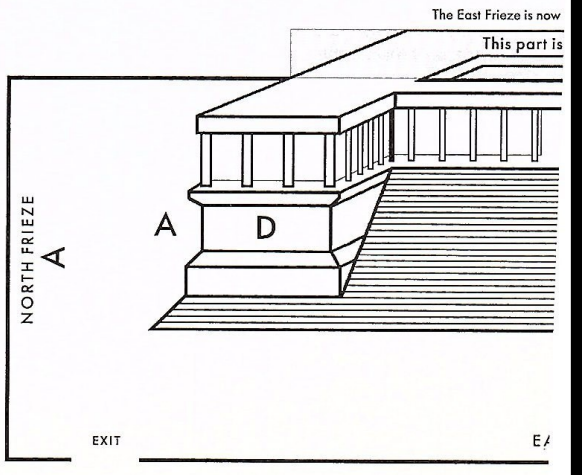
ish government. In Berlin, systematic attempts at reconstruction began. Thanks to the efforts of Berlin's architectural experts and archaeologists, and the assistance of ancient stone markings, a fairly accurate reconstruction of the frieze was able to be pieced together from its numerous fragments.

In 1901, the first Pergamon Museum opened. A mere few years later, however it had to be closed due to problems with its technical design. Its replacement, the present day Pergamon Museum, is larger and more structurally sound; it opened officially in 1930. The west side of the altar and the frieze depicting the battle between the gods and the giants can be seen in the central exhibition room of the museum.



Exhibition plan in the museum
(The Telephus Frieze is on the walls of the courtyard)

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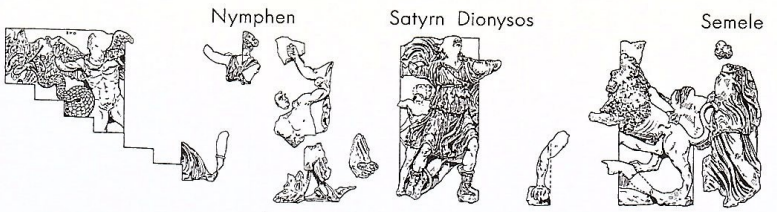
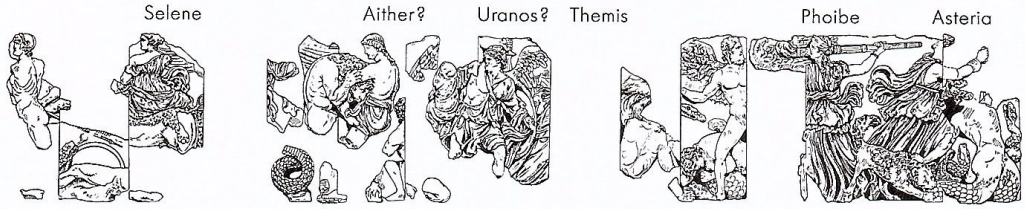
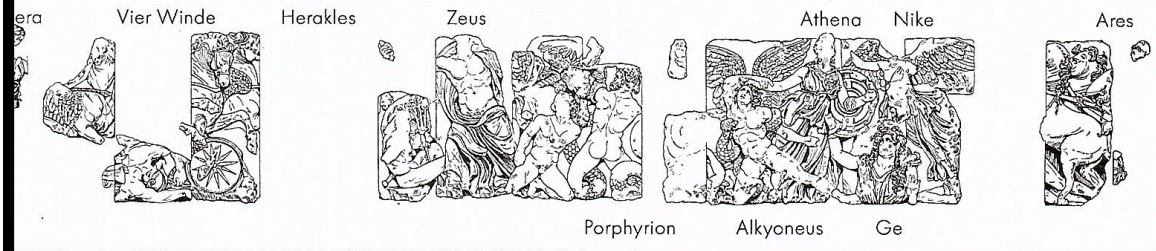
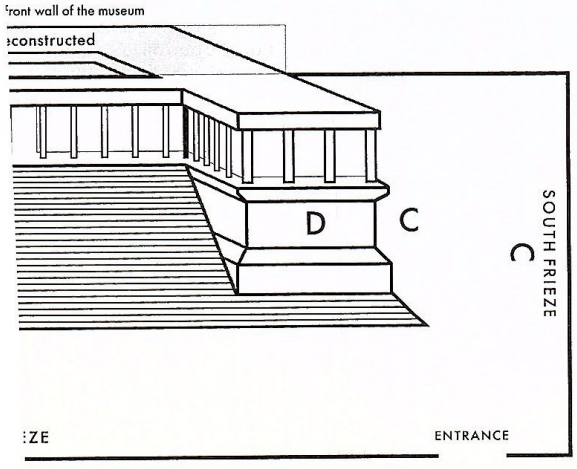






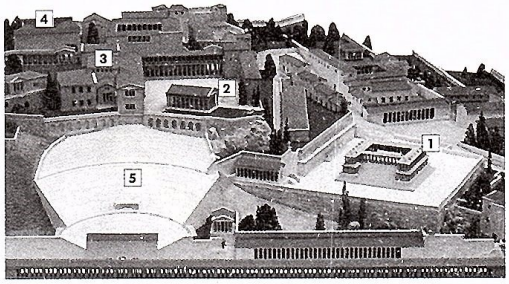


The Altar

Site of Worship on the Acropolis

Here one sees an uncommon building: a colonnade resting on an immense foundation. The foundation is surrounded by a 113 m long frieze cut by 20 m wide steps on its western side. The actual sacrificial altar stood in the central courtyard surrounded by the colonnade. The Pergamon Altar was built during the reign of King Eumenes II around 170 BC and is a outstanding monument in the Greek art. Its connections to an older temple on a neighbouring terrace (the Athena Temple dating from the 4th century BC) are barely visible. We cannot determine to whom this altar was dedicated: to Zeus, to Athena, or to them both ? Unfortunately, the fragmented dedication message reveals no clear answer. If we had more information about the history

of Pergamon, we would be able to explain the origins of the altar in greater detail. However, we can surmise that the theme of the great frieze – the battle of the gods and the giants – was chosen to commemorate the struggle of the Pergamons against invading forces from Asia Minor. With the help of their Roman allies, the Pergamons were able to defeat their enemies in 165 BC after years of war. Accordingly, the altar was probably commissioned by King Eumenes II to honour their victory. A look at the model of the Pergamon Acropolis shows that the citadel was composed of building upon building. Containing the great altar (1), various temples, Athena Temple (2), the library (3), royal palaces (4), theatre (5), and additional public buildings.
This metropolis was virtually unparallelled in the ancient Hellenic world. The present – day city of Pergamon (Bergama) can be found on the westcoast of Turkey, across from the island of Lesbos.



Model of the Acropolis of Pergamon (section)

Ara Marmorea Magna
The Great Marble Altar

In the museum, only the west side (D) of the altar is reconstructed in its original dimensions. Five steps rising from the nearly square foundation (36 m wide, 34 m deep) support a monumental pedestal, whose sides are decorated by a 2.30 m high frieze, crowned by a great projecting cornice. Graceful columns with Ionic capitals surround the upper building. Its interior walls contain a smaller frieze which tells the story of the life of Telephus, Hercules' son and founder of the city of Pergamon. As Hercules is also one of the central figures in the great frieze, he provides the mythological link between the two. Less is known about the roof decorations which one can see before the northern and southern projections. These figures include griffins, horses, centaurs and small statues of gods in motion, probably shown in the act of performing mythological deeds. Sculptured to be viewed from below the roof figures are only summarily worked on their backs. The entire artistic programme is filled with references to Pergamon's political history, and its imagery varies constantly in accordance with its placement on the building. More than 100 over–lifesize figures of high artistic quality appear in the great frieze. Crowding together in dramatic action these practically free–standing figures seem to jostle one another and strain the boundaries of their architectural framework.
In comparison, the nature scenes and interior spaces of the Telephus frieze have the calm and control of a literary narrative. In the great frieze, a number of goddesses have joined in the struggle. While they seldom physically overcome their enemies, their dominance is evident in their cool and thoughtful countenances. In contrast, the pain and relentless cruelty of their destruction is depicted with unsparing realism on the bodies and faces of the giants. No struggling group resembles another: differences in clothing, hair, and even footwear are elaborated down to the smallest detail. For this reason, we believe an artist of exeptional creativity must have designed the entire relief. Recent scholarship points to the Athenian sculptor Phyromachos. Although this name is unverified, the names of others working on the project have been confirmed. From these we know that master craftsmen from leading artistic centres all over the Hellenic world came to work for Pergamon.
The battle of the gods and the giants was a popular theme in Greek art: during every Athenian festival it was woven into the cloak of the statue of Athena Parthenos, and specific scenes were depicted in the fourteen metopes of the Parthenon. Like in Pergamon, the mythological battle had political overtones in Athens: it symbolized the Athenians' victory over the Persians, and soon came to be a symbol of the Attic state. One of the first comprehensive descriptions of the battle can be found in Hesiod's *Theogony* ("Creation of the Gods"). The version depicted in the Pergamon frieze, however, was derived from contemporary Hellenic epics and poetry in addition to this older narrative. The myth tells the story of the earth mother Gaia, who, from the blood of the emasculated Uranos, gave birth to the giants who would attempt to overthrow the Olympians. An oracle had predicted that the gods would only be able to resist the giants if a mortal could be persuaded to fight on their side. Not surprisingly, this part fell to the hero Hercules, who, next to Zeus, occupies the most prominent position in the frieze.
The eastern frieze (B) reserved for the Olympians: Hera participates in the struggle on the left; Hercules, Zeus, Athena and Ares battle in the centre and on the right. Geneological references draw the narrative around the frieze and give it continuity: on the south-east corner of the altar, the names of goddesses like Leto, Hekate, Phoebe and Asteria appear; on the north - east corner, Aphrodite fights together with Ares. The gods of day and night – Eos (the goddess of the dawn), Helios (the sun god), and Selene (the goddess of the moon) – wage war on the southern frieze (C), and the sea gods raging on the western side spill over on to the adjacent northern corner. The northern frieze (A) provides the battlefield for both the followers of Ares (the war god), and the Fates (the goddesses of destiny).

Text: Dianne Newmann Photography: Staatliche Museen, Antikensammlung Design: Klaus D. Schwarz Production: Museumspädagogik / Besucherdienst
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BABYLON

When Athens flourished, Babylon was but a provincial town; the desire of Alexander the Great as ruler of Asia to make the city once more the capital of an empire was thwarted by his untimely death; when the Roman legions conquered Europe, its name was scarcely remembered. The tradition passed on derived for the most part from the Bible and was all but praiseworthy: "The Babylonian Whore". The city became a symbol of vice and lechery. For a long time Europe only knew this image. Yet Babylon was once a thriving metropolis, situated on the navigable Euphrates, in the midst of abundant fields and palm gardens. It was the center of international trade and of specialized industries, the abode of the god Marduk and his powerful priesthood, as well as the seat of political power of an empire comparable to that of the Romans. Our knowledge of these facts only became available when, in the 19th century, excavations commenced in the Near East.

Excavations
The exploration of Babylon began relatively late in time, probably because the remains of the city were by no means imposing. Mere heaps of debris and mounds of sand, only one of which still bore the name "Babil", gave account of the location and size of the town. The remnants of colored glazed bricks suggesting that splendid buildings must have existed in the city, however, facilitated the decision to begin exploration there. What the excavators, digging on behalf of the Berlin Museums and the German Oriental Society, unearthed during 18 years of continuous work from 1899 to 1917, elevated Babylon to the first rank of important cities of Antiquity.

History
The beginnings of Babylon lay in the 3rd millennium B.C. Only at the beginning of the 2nd millennium, however, does a dynasty of Babylonian kings become evident, constantly contesting neighboring states for the rule of Mesopotamia. King Hammurabi (1792-1750) eventually succeeded in uniting into one empire the lands from the region of the Persian Gulf all the way to eastern Syria. At the beginning of the first millennium B.C., Babylon was under Assyrian rule. Following the collapse of the Assyrian Empire in 612, Babylon once more became a capital. The so-called Neo-Babylonian Empire, whose most important kings were Nabopolassar (625-605) and Nebuchadnezzar (605-562), comprised the entire cultivated land and the steppe regions of the Near East west of the Tigris. From all parts of the empire, booty and tribute as well as merchandise flowed into the city and formed, next to an enormous agricultural income, the base of its wealth, which was to find its architectural expression in buildings of a hitherto unknown scale. But already in 539 the Persians conquered the country, and Babylon lost its significance. In the course of the following centuries the city was slowly deserted.

Town plan
Babylon was situated on both sides of the Euphrates, the old town to the east, another half of the town to the west of the river. It was protected by a double ring of walls, the inner wall being some 6.5, and the outer wall 3.5 meters thick. At distances of 17-18 meters, towers of, respectively, 11 and 4.5 meters width formed part of the defenses. At least 8 double gateways stretching 50 meters afforded entrance to the city. The old town alone comprised an area of ca. 2 1/4 km², a large part of which was occupied by palaces and temples. Further protection was offered by the eastern wall spanning some 8 km, which also protected buildings beyond the inner city, for example, the Summer Palace in the north.

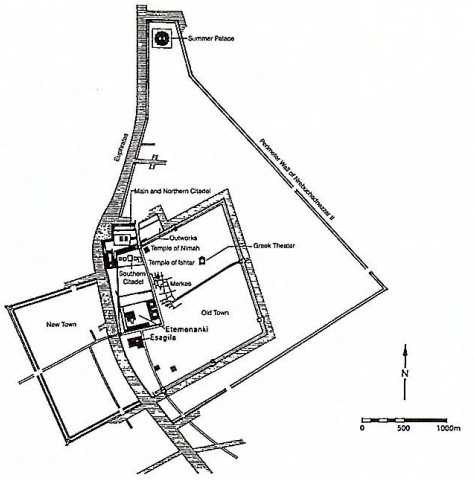

Fig. 1 The town plan of Babylon (ground plan, 6th century B.C.)

Sanctuaries
In the center was situated the double temple complex of the god Marduk, the tutelary deity of the town. At the beginning of spring, Marduk received in his temple Esagila the statues of the country's gods preparatory to the celebration of the New Year's Festival, lasting eleven days. The festival served as cultic introduction of the year and was the occasion to fix destinies and probably also to confirm the office of the king. While the role of the ground level temple Esagila, in whose chapels the images of the gods were erected, is clear, the purpose in the cult of the temple tower Etemenanki, situated further to the north, remains uncertain. And yet it is this edifice to which Babylon owes its fame. Measuring 90 m along its sides and of about the same height, Etemenanki was that "Tower of Babel" which was admired by Herodotus and mentioned in the Bible. Built with mud bricks within a facing of baked bricks, it rose above the land in seven levels, constituting a pinnacle in the architectural tradition of high temples. Robbed of bricks and decayed in later millennia, only remains of the foundations and legend bear witness to the past glory of this tower. A side from the main sanctuary, other temples were built in the town. There were, furthermore, as yet unexcavated chapels situated in the residential districts, public places of sacrifice and family sanctuaries.

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Among other eminent buildings of Babylon are above all the palaces of the kings. These were situated in the north, close to the bank of the river, inside and outside the city walls. The most fully reconstructable of these buildings is

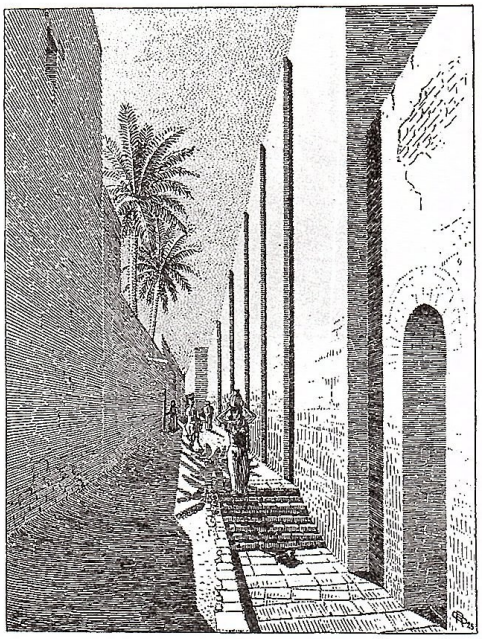

Fig. 2 View of a street in the old city of Babylon

the Southern Palace of Nebuchadnezzar II, which, situated inside the city, was divided by five large courts. It constituted the administrative center of the town and the empire; to the south of the central courtyard was situated the colossal throne room, whose outer walls were decorated with reliefs and paintings of glazed bricks–a jewel of Mesopotamian architecture. A vaulted construction in the northeastern part of the palace suggests that the building had been erected as a multi-storied structure, as may already be deduced from the considerable thickness of the walls. The famous "Hanging Gardens" were for a long time thought to have been located here, but their real location is still disputed. The residential districts have until now been little explored. They offer a picture that is still typical of the Orient today: narrow, twisted lanes, sometimes enlarged into small squares, with buildings, often consisting of only a ground floor, whose outer walls are windowless. Their ground plans, though, resemble those of the palaces: the court, as central element connecting the rooms, was the main living room of the Babylonian extended family. It offered fresh air and cooling shade–here was the place to cook and bake. It was the day room of the family, where as the night, at least in the hot season, was spent on the roof. Mobile and thus archaeologically insignificant markets provided the supplies for the population. A central market place has never been located. Similarly uncertain remains the sanitary supply and disposal, even though water lines as well as toilets and sewage installations are known.

Processional Way and Ishtar Gate

Today the most famous buildings of Babylon are the Processional Way and the Ishtar Gate. They were situated at the northern limits of the old city, where access had been confined by the outer walls of the palaces. The road was thus bordered on both sides by walls and town planners were afforded the opportunity to decorate the course of the street with a frieze of glazed bricks. The choice of decoration was determined by the New Year's Festival. On the eleventh day of the festival the procession of gods followed the street on its way from the outer festival house to the temples in the center of Babylon. Building inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar II point explicitly to this fact. The visitor to Babylon saw two rows of striding lions–symbols of the goddess Ishtar–before he arrived at the gate. In a stretch of ca. 180 m were once 120 lions, 60 on each side. The walled street canyon was 20 m wide and 250 m long. This enclosed part of the Processional Way was, however, shorter than its continuation to the corner of the Etemenanki sanctuary, where it turned off and ended at the bridge over the Euphrates. Destination and high point of the outer part of the city was the Ishtar Gate. Integrated into the procession course, it had been furnished with colored reliefs, here covering the complete outer wall. Erected in three building stages, the uppermost level displayed colored representations of dragons and bulls, the symbols of the gods Marduk and Adad. In the Vorderasiatisches Museum, only parts of this installation have been reconstructed: about 30 m of street walls 8 m apart, as well as the smaller city gate with its two flanking towers. From countless fragments, the animals of the relief have here been pieced together with some parts of the walls, showing that the reconstruction largely matches the original.

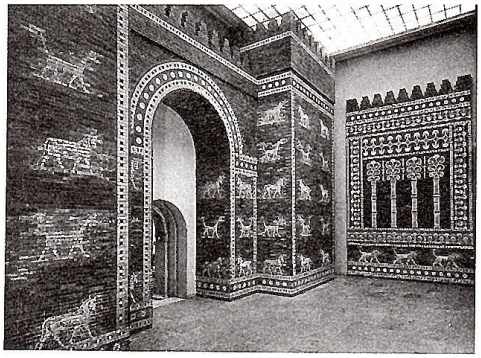

Fig. 3 The reconstructed Ishtar Gate in the Vorderasiatisches Museum

Literature

R. Koldewey, Das wiedererstehende Babylon, 5th ed., Berlin, 1990

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Production: Museumspädagogik/Besucherdienst
Translation: Klaudia Englund
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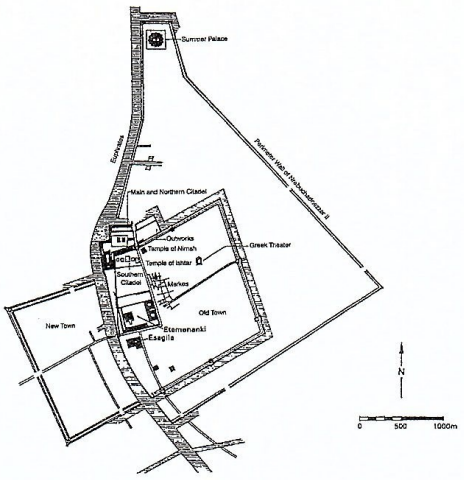

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